

Pfizer and the Vatican

Sources say Pope Francis met privately twice last year with Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla



Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla talks during a press conference with European Commission President after a visit to the Pfizer-BioNtech factory in Puurs, Belgium, April 23, 2021. (photo: John Thys / Pool / AFP via Getty Images)

VATICAN CITY — The Register has learned that Pope Francis privately held undisclosed meetings with the CEO of Pfizer last year as questions arise over the efficacy of the vaccines in preventing transmission, which are now being mandated for all Vatican staff and visitors.

According to Vatican sources, the Holy Father twice met Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla at the Vatican, although the precise details are not known.

Unlike most papal private audiences, these meetings were not announced by the Holy See Press Office, which did not respond to repeated requests to confirm the meetings.

A Pfizer spokesman said, “We can’t confirm or deny as, per our policy, the movements of our executives are considered confidential.”

Bourla’s meetings with the Pope would not be the first such unannounced papal encounter in recent years. In November 2019, shortly before the COVID-19 health emergency began, the Pope privately received Melinda Gates. The meeting, well known in the Vatican, was not announced and has never been officially acknowledged.

Last May, Bourla took part in an online Vatican health conference titled “Unite to Prevent & Unite to Cure” that included a significant focus on COVID-19 treatments and prevention as well as providing a platform for promoting vaccines produced by large pharmaceutical companies.

Other speakers at the meeting co-hosted by the Pontifical Council for Culture included Stephane Bancel, the CEO of Moderna, another large anti-COVID-19 vaccine producer, Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Joe Biden’s chief medical officer, and Dr. Francis Collins, then director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

First to Use Pfizer

Vatican City State was one of the first authorities to administer vaccines after it signed a contract with Pfizer in late 2020 to exclusively offer its Pfizer-BioNTech pharmaceutical product to its staff. The first inoculations were rolled out in early 2021.

A strong proponent of the vaccine in light of what it believes is a “continuation and worsening of the current health emergency,” the Vatican has been mandating the Pfizer injection for all staff and visitors since Dec. 23.

From Jan. 31, triple vaccination (two doses plus the booster) will be required to enter Vatican territory. (Proof of recent recovery from COVID-19 can also gain admittance, and there are no requirements for public liturgies and general audiences.)

But the mandates have been imposed when effectiveness of all the COVID-19 vaccines at preventing spread of the disease is being questioned.

In December 2020, professor Andrea Arcangeli, director of the Vatican's Health and Hygiene Directorate, said the Vatican chose to use the Pfizer vaccine because in clinical trials it had "been shown to be 95% effective." He added that "subsequently, other vaccines produced with different methods can be introduced after evaluating their effectiveness and full safety."

The 95% figure means that vaccinated people had a 95% lower risk of getting COVID-19 compared with the control group participants in trials, who weren't vaccinated. So in other words, Pfizer was telling the public that in its own clinical trial, vaccinated people were 20 times less likely than the control group to get COVID-19.

However, in a Jan. 10 interview with Yahoo News, Bourla acknowledged that the first two doses of the vaccine are now largely ineffective against the spread of the Omicron variant and that, although Omicron is "milder" than previous variants, because of the high infection rates, hospitalizations have been "going much higher in terms of severe disease, ICU occupation, etc."

"We know that the two doses of the vaccine have very limited protection, if any," Bourla told Yahoo News. "The three doses, with the booster, offer reasonable protection against hospitalization and death."

Cases Continue Despite Vaccination

Despite the original 95% effectivity rate against the earlier variants that prompted the Vatican to sign a contract with Pfizer, Vatican personnel have been continuing to contract COVID-19 in the Vatican over the past year despite being double- or triple-vaccinated. The latest case is that of Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, who is currently infected with COVID-19 despite having received the booster shot.

An official at the Pontifical Council told the Register this morning “he has tested positive, but we expect him back in the office next week.”

Vatican sources have also told the Register that as many as 14 Swiss Guards contracted COVID-19 in the second half of last year but the cases were never reported. All of them had had two Pfizer doses but almost no symptoms.

The Vatican has reported no cases of hospitalizations or deaths since the vaccine rollout, and throughout the pandemic, no COVID-19 deaths have been reported in Vatican City.

However, since the vaccine program began in early 2021, the Holy See Press Office has ceased reporting new cases of COVID-19, in contrast to 2020, when it regularly announced if any personnel or residents had been tested positive for the virus.

The last reported Vatican staff to be infected were Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello, then the president of Vatican City State, and the papal almoner, Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, in December 2020. Both survived the disease.

Despite concerns about the Pfizer vaccine being tainted by abortion, Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin appeared this week to rule out any conscience exemption right.

He told the Register that Vatican employees seeking an exemption because they oppose the vaccine’s link to abortion “seems not to be justified” as the Pfizer product was only tested rather than produced using the cell lines derived from abortion.

The Pfizer–BioNTech vaccine has also caused adverse side effects including heart ailments and blood clotting especially in younger recipients, with some causing death. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention insists these “reports are rare and the known and potential benefits of COVID–19 vaccination outweigh the known and potential risks [of these side effects].”

Thousands of these and other cases have nevertheless been reported on government sites in various countries (see the UK figures for the Pfizer vaccine here) where suspected side effects can be voluntarily reported, and citizens have created websites to record their own testimonies of adverse effects from all COVID–19 vaccines.

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